Demystification of the "Innocent Eye": Nelson Goodman, Ernst H. Gombrich, and the Limitation of Conventionalism

BOWEN WANG

Abstract

Both literary and artistic historiography has been devoted to exploring the basic relationship between the real world and the work of art, from the mimetic theories of Plato and Aristotle to the contemporary theorists, i.e. Nelson Goodman and Ernst H. Gombrich. Their attempts to probe into the nature of pictorial representation mainly respond to two questions: What is the relationship between representation and that it is to represent (between picture and reality)? What is the mechanism of, or in an ontological sense, what is representation? Guided by these two questions, my article will critically investigate the models of Goodman's and Gombrich's representation theory on account of convention rather than resemblance, expression, or imitation.

Keywords: representation; conventionalism; Goodman; Gombrich; innocent eye

The mimetic theory of representation presupposes a fundamental distinction between the visual/pictorial and the verbal/linguistic representation. The former, as formulated by Plato in his *Republic* at the beginning of western philosophy, is determined by the resemblance of the perceptible world through the copying or imitating act of the absolute Form in the Ideal world (63), whereas the mechanism of language operates in the Saussurean sort of "semantically significant structures" (Hyman and Bantinaki) based on a system of socio-cultural conventions. In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, Nelson Goodman and Ernest H. Gombrich have substantially challenged this division and the Platonic theory of representation behind it. They argue for a conventionalist view that all pictorial representation is conventional, which implies that the art itself like philosophy and science can be viewed as a cognitive way of understanding and a creative process of shaping the reality, rather than a mode of mimesis or imitation.

Both literary and artistic historiography has been devoted to exploring the basic relationship between the reality and the work of art, from the mimetic theories of Plato and Aristotle to the contemporary art historians and critics. Their attempts to probe into the nature of pictorial representation mainly respond to two questions (Wollheim 185-90): What is the relationship between the picture as an artwork and the depicted in real world? What is the apparatus of, or in an ontological sense, what is representation? Guided by these two questions, therefore, my article will highlight the common idea of conventionality in models of Goodman's and Gombrich's representation theories and further identify their different stances toward it. Having compared their theoretical frameworks, my discussion will move toward a main concern about the limitation of their conventionalism. For Goodman, an "extreme relativist" (Mitchell 81), his limitation

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 44, No. 1, Spring 2021 [71-78]

can be discerned in his functionalist and formalist approach to a symbol scheme, and his ahistorical and value-free interest in his theorisation of conventional representation, *e.g.* his treatment of realism in opposition to the notion of great realism in the view of Georg Lukács. Gombrich, on the other hand, shows his indeterminate attitudes from the conventionalist position, then to a revised stance in which he begins to question the reliability of the convention and emphasise the naturalness of art. Finally, the value and the limitation of their similar yet distinctive systems of conventionalism will allow me a conclusion.

Goodman's and Gombrich's Theories of Representation

Goodman's *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (1976) and Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960), both have shown their ambitions to defend a conventionalist theory of art by establishing a systematic knowledge of pictorial representation as part of the contemporary aesthetics, however by different methods. As the title suggests, Goodman's monograph bases on a "systematic inquiry" (*Languages of Art* xi) by the structuralist linguistic approach, a tradition of analytic philosophy, foregrounding the role of symbol in the representational relationship between the artistic and the real world. To respond to Wollheim's two basic questions, Goodman starts from dissociating representation from resemblance, namely a breakup from the obsolete idea of mimetic theory by pulling out its roots. Resemblance is a "dyadic relation" while representation is "triadic" (Files 405), for resemblance is merely a copy or physical reflection between the representation-bearer and the representational object, but Goodman argues that representation should involve the role of denotation as "the core […] independent of resemblance" (*LA* 5). Goodman's denotation here, is a requisite relationship of symbolisation or reference between a picture and the object it stands for. It is a cognitive agent in a conventional system of classification or symbols which embodies how human beings accept and interpret the world. In this sense, convention plays a significant role in understanding the relationship between the representation-bearer and the representational object which the resemblance lacks, and that is why Goodman rejects the imitation theory by summarising: "resemblance in any degree is no sufficient condition for representation" (*LA* 4). For instance, neither the Duke of Wellington nor the Marlborough Castle could represent their depictions, though the portrait or the Constable painting of them can catch the likeness and represent in reverse order.

To Goodman, pictorial representation, is connected to a "conceptual framework" (Giovannelli) namely a symbol system, in which a piece of artwork can be understood and the viewer can get access to the visual world. In his review of Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* in the same year of the latter's publication, Goodman reaches an agreement with Gombrich on the rejection of the "innocent eye" by regarding perception as a human faculty that "depends heavily on conceptual schemata [and] the raw material of vision cannot be extracted from the finished product" (Review of *Art and Illusion* 596). Their idea of conventionalism attempts to attack the dominant myth of the "innocent eye" which presupposes that the human knowledge is a sensory process of receiving raw materials without prejudices, affections, or instrumental interests. Goodman criticises this naïve comprehension of human perception, and to him, the eye is rather capricious and complicated apparatus that "selects, rejects, organises, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyses, constructs" (*LA* 7-8). The copy theory of representation with this pair of innocent, mindless eye, is unable to explain what is actually being copied and thereby echoes the Kantian dictum "the innocent eye is blind and the virgin mind empty" (*LA* 8).

Goodman’s representation theory in this Kantian tradition, implies that human perception depends upon a prior knowledge of convention, which is guided and constructed by the conceptual framework.

Compared to Goodman’s system of symbolisation in the socio-cultural dimension, Gombrich’s conventionalist theory is based on what he defines as “schema” (Bull 208), the cognitive presupposition of the world from a psychological point of view – also implied by his subtitle of *Art and Illusion*. They both repudiate the myth of “innocent eye” and then draw attention to the conventionality in the reception and interpretation between the image and the viewer. Even though Goodman and Gombrich are concerned about the representation processing between the artwork and the observer instead of the mimetic relationship between the work and the object in Platonic philosophy of art, they react quite differently: Goodman’s visuals representing a symbol or a code in a conventional or symbolic system internalised by a socio-cultural entity, whereas Gombrich’s schema theory working more like an active psychological process in human’s cognition. As discussed above, Goodman’s symbol system works as an extension of what have been achieved in the realm of structuralist linguistics (Giovannelli), but his general comprehension of symbols covers both linguistic and non-linguistic symbols, *e.g.* painting, music, dance, as well as architecture, in order to contribute to systematically knowing, understanding, and interpreting the entire world of human experience. The way to approach the pictorial or other kinds of representation in this sort requires the preliminary knowledge of the convention or the learning of the cultural context, so that the viewer can realise the reference system in Goodman’s forms of denotation and exemplification (Giovannelli; Moriarty and Kenny 236).

Different from Goodman’s position on art as language, Gombrich’s theory of pictorial representation, more importantly, addresses the cognitively active processing between the representation-bearer and the representational object. Some critics point out the essence of Gombrich’s theory, noticeably under the influence of Immanuel Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein (Braembussche 22), is “his conception of the human being as an active agent in forming his or her experiences in the world” (Kim 36), and his idea of a ubiquitous schematic system expatiates on the psychological and perceptual involvement between the picture and the spectator. This schematic system not only embodies a Goodman’s scheme of symbol in the power of cultures and traditions, but also constructs a system of transcendental knowledge in our mind to conceptualise the world that we have seen. It is a sense of inseparability between the shape and the interpenetration, as exemplified by Gombrich’s duck-rabbit image: the eye is not innocent at all but an intellectual organism, and the viewer is always intellectually aware of the fact that we need “a vocabulary before [we] can embark on a ‘copy’ of reality” (*Art and Illusion* 71). Gombrich’s “vocabulary” never means a conventional system of arbitrary relationships in terms of differentiation like Goodman’s language of art, but rather a conceptual schema by which the spectator is able to approach or envision the real world. The psychological effects emphasised here appear as a “presence” (*AI* 90), a perceptual tendency and conceptual faculty in human nature. Hence, the relationship between the picture and the reality is not passive but active, within a cognitive instead of a cultural structure.

Gombrich’s notion of representation is fundamentally grounded on the system of his schemata, which are prior concepts of the object provided by the psychological thinking of perception of human being (Bull 214). His schemata are a cluster of preconceptions, or “a mental set” (*AI* 50) in a post-Kantian period of aesthetics. He directly quotes Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* at the beginning of his chapter “Truth and the Stereotype” in *Art* *and Illusion*: "The schematism by which our understanding deals with the phenomenal world […] is a skill so deeply hidden in the human soul that we shall hardly guess the secret trick that Nature here employs" (qtd. in *AI* 52). As he discusses afterwards, his idea of schema is considered as "individual visual information [entered] upon a pre-existing blank or formulary" (*AI* 60) which, either conceptual or inscribed, consists in the psychological progress of recognition and production. In this way, how do Gombrich's schemata work to aid the representation to proceed and the image to come into being? According to Bull, the structure of pictorial representation is embedded in the complex interactions among three systems, *i.e.* (A) images related to objects, (B) schemata to objects, as well as (C) schemata to images:

> On [Gombrich's] reading, the pictorial system (as opposed to the pictorial scheme) exists through the elision of the pictorial scheme with the schematic scheme in perception. When looking at the scheme of (A) we see the scheme of schemata and so create system (A) by imagining that we are in system (B). It is thus by experiencing images as schemata that the pictorial scheme becomes a system. (Bull 212)

To Gombrich's psychological approach, the pictorial representation is an intellectually active process between the object and the image, in the course of which the human mind functions as a cognitive agent of transforming, interpreting, and reproducing. His ingenious examples to substantiate this argument can be observed in his comparison between Duerer's woodcut rhinoceros and Heath's engraving *African Rhinoceros*, and another between different depictions of the natural scenery in Derwentwater by an anonymous British romantic in 1826 and Chinese painter Chiang Yee in 1936. Although both pairs of artists depicted the same representational objects, their representation-bearer, or specifically speaking, their paintings are quite distinctive in manner and style. Gombrich explains that it is because "[p]ainting is an activity, and the artist will therefore tend to see what he paints rather to paint what he sees" (*AI* 69). In this sense, all art is conventional and influenced by what Gombrich calls "beholder's share" (*AI* 176). This key term is equal to the conceptual schema in various forms of vocabulary, tradition, technique, style, etc. Gombrich's schema is to some extent related to Harold Bloom's canon or the anxiety of influence, a misprision of one's actual sources and cultural traditions: Bloom defines every poem as "a misinterpretation [misunderstanding, misalliance] of a parent poem" (1658-59), while Gombrich discovers the role of illusion in the artistic creation by claiming that "[w]hen we deal with masters of the past who were both great artists and great 'illusionists', the study of art and the study of illusion cannot always be kept apart" (*AI* 6). According to their psychoanalytic models, neither the verbal nor the visual representation can be virginal between the perceptible reality and the artistic product, but instead an aggressive and self-assertive challenge of the shared views.

A Debate on the Nature of the Convention

Goodman and Gombrich, in the similar manner of Bloom's manifesto for antithetical criticism in a Nietzschean destruction of the Platonic philosophical tradition, employ an unorthodox and groundbreaking approach and problematise the dominant prevalence of the mimetic theory in western culture derived from the 4^{th} century B.C. in Greece and revived in the 15^{th} century Italian Renaissance (Kim 35-36). They disrupt the traditional binary relationship of the pictorial representation between the picture and the object, and critically identify the inevitable and significant existence of the convention, either in

Goodman's term "symbol" or Gombrich's "conceptual schema". The binary structure of mimetic view to understand the representation is based on the degree of likeness or resemblance between the artwork and the depicted, as an accurate, realistic depiction observed by the naked, innocent eye (see Fig. 1):

Figure 1. *Model of the Mimetic Theory of Representation*

Nevertheless, Goodman then declares that "[n]othing is seen nakedly or naked" (*LA* 8) in a consensus with Gombrich on the denial of the "innocent eye." What they believe in the legitimate explanation of pictorial representation is the involvement of convention (see Fig. 2), which renders all representation "indirect, conditional and mediated" rather than "direct, unconditional and immediate" as a perfect copy of the external world (Braembussche 26):

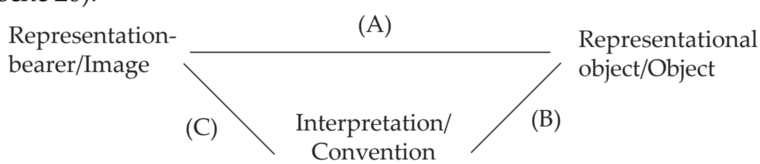

Figure 2. *Model of the Conventionalist Theory of Representation*

The main divergence here, between Goodman's and Gombrich's conventionalism, is different understanding on the nature of convention, namely what in fact forces the spectator to gain this automatic interpretation to comprehend and shape the world. To Goodman, he acknowledges that "the way we see and depict depends upon and varies with experience, practice, interests, and attitudes" (*LA* 10), and more precisely, his notion of convention such as "experience, practice, interests, and attitudes" is originated from a culture-bound system of symbols which should be understood in semantic and syntactic relationships in the same way to the language. Gombrich with other constructivist psychologists rather takes the transcendental knowledge and the acquaintance of socio-cultural codes or conventions for granted, and to a greater extent, he prioritises the subjectivity of human perception in a cognitive processing to know and construct the world, based on a very Kantian underpinning that human knowledge is a combination of the productivity of mind and the information receiving from the reality.

In this way, it is reasonable to argue that the relationship between Goodman's and Gombrich's conventionalist theories of representation is more a continuum than a deviation. According to the model of the processing continuum from Moriarty and Kenny (239), the philosophical idea of representation has experienced a development from natural perception as an essentialist view dependent on inborn sensory faculty, to the process of social or cultural conventions, and further to the cognitive activities based on intricate information processing and mental manipulation. The continuity here witnesses an increasingly self-conscious psychological involvement, turning out to be the main difference between Goodman's and Gombrich's systems. The most complex model thus should be the cognitive processing, which as formulated by Gombrich, is based on the "interplay of perceptual and conventional activities" (Moriarty and Kenny 240), a synthesis of the experiential knowledge of arbitrary symbols in cultural dimension and the inherent learning of cognition in human mind.

The Limitation of the Conventionalist View

Nelson Goodman from his purely conventionalist or relativist view of representation, succeeds in meeting his target at constructing a general grammar of system of symbols; nonetheless, it is noteworthy to be on alert for his technical approach to functions and relationships of sign. His structural linguistic analysis tends to be on the edge of a sort of "linguistic imperialism" (Mitchell 56) which follows the Barthesian predominance of linguistics over semiology – the general study of signs, by eliminating the primary difference even between a picture and a map due to the reason that the "relation between a picture and what it represents is thus assimilated to the relation between a predicate and what it applies" (*LA* 5). Goodman then fails to differentiate the pictorial representation from other symbol systems, even though he tries to use a "replete"/"undifferentiated" structure for depiction to differ from a "disjoint"/"differentiated" (*LA* 148-54; 225-32) one for description. What he responds to this problem is still grounded on his functionalist and formalist way of thinking representation, neglecting any historical significance or aesthetic judgement. Another more important account for Goodman called by Gombrich as an "extreme conventionalis[t]" ("Image and Code" 14) must be his lack of perceptual or psychological processing in his system, which is dependent on habits, conventions, rules, and socio-cultural codes without an obvious cognitive efficacy. For these reasons it is possible to predicate severe objections open to Goodman's theoretical limits, in addition to his self-repudiation of "questions of value [and] canons of criticism" (*LA* xi):

> He professes no interest in the history of any of the arts, or even of the philosophical inquiry he is pursuing. He has little to say about certain time-honoured topics such as censorship, the moral or didactic functions of art, the issues of politics and ideology that enter inevitably into the making and using of art. He doesn't question, most fundamentally, the historicity of the concept of art itself, and seems to proceed on the assumption that this is simply a universal category that can be described from a neutral, analytic perspective. (Mitchell 71)

Goodman's work in the manner of analytic philosophy and value-free science, also can be seen in his version of realism. Different from Lukács with his Marxist treatment of realism as the authentic literature of its period whose essential mission is to "seek out the lasting features in people, in their relations with each other and in the situations in which they have to act [and] focus on those elements which endure over long periods and which constitutes the objective human tendencies of society and indeed of mankind as a whole" (47), Goodman on the other hand, treats it merely as a matter of habit, familiarity, and convention. His notion of realism cannot ask major realists to care about the "progressive development of the masses' own experiences" (Lukács 57) in a dialectical view of history between evolution and revolution, for his ahistorical sense of realism is "relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time" (*LA* 37). Rather than penetrating the underlying network of the society and human life, Goodman considers realism to be a stereotyped or standardised style that has been commonly accepted. Realism, at this point fails to be an ideological reflection on the moral, cultural, and historical values of the society, and simply become a "matter of habit", a "plan of correlation" (*LA* 38).

As Goodman confesses that *conventional* is a "tricky term" (Review of "Perspective as a Convention" 86) and he himself tries to avoid using it in late works like *Ways of Worldmaking*, Gombrich similarly, exhibits an indeterminate attitude toward the distinction between nature and convention. The nature-convention opposition can date back to the very origin of western philosophy in Plato's *Cratylus* as a universal commonplace to separate the mimetic theory of representation from the conventionalist view. Based on this binary opposition, more and more conventionalists tend to deem the pictorial representation as the prior knowledge acquired from socio-cultural rules and conventions. Gombrich finds himself at times as an "arch-conventionalist" (Mitchell 77) who argues for that "the study of art will be increasingly supplemented by inquiry into the linguistics of the visual image" (*AI* 9), approving of a linguistic model to understand the representation like Goodman. Nevertheless, as later criticising Goodman's extreme conventionalism, Gombrich realises that conventionalist point of view based on nature-convention distinction "has led to certain difficulties" since "this distinction is unreal" (*AI* 87). More radically, he undermines this traditional binary in his critique of the scope and limits of conventionalism, where he recognises that "the traditional opposition between 'nature' and 'convention' turns out to be misleading [and] what we observe is rather a continuum between skills which come naturally to us and others which may be next to impossible for anyone to acquire" ("Image and Code" 16-17). The limitation of conventionalism here is the clash established between nature and convention, and to Gombrich, the only difference between natural perception and conventional knowledge is the degree of difficulties that human needs to learn how to use the sign.

The touchstone of the conventionalism as the boundary between nature and convention thus eventually collapses, and Gombrich asserts that the pictorial representation should be deemed as a continuum instead of a confrontation – as Moriarty and Kenny's continual processing model reveals – which produces a combined knowledge of natural perception of what we simply see, together with a more complicated and dynamic processing of conventional codes in our mind. However, it is also supposed to beware of Gombrich's reconciliation, to a certain degree, as an ambiguous strategy of his uncertain, paradoxical thinking about the conventionality and the naturalness of pictorial representation. In *Art and Illusion*, he views the image as a conventional sign, since the comprehension of the representation-bearer, or the work of art requires a transcendental knowledge learned by specific techniques and skills, whereas in "Image and Code" he questions the reliability of convention and emphasises the naturalness of art, for the reason that when seeing the famous mosaic "Beware of the Dog" in Pompeii "we do not have to acquire knowledge about teeth and claws in the same way in which we learn a language" (20). He is likely to base this idea of image as a natural sign, pointed out by Mitchell, on the "*consumption* rather than the *production*" (85), not on the relationship between the artist and the artwork, but between that and the viewer. In spite of his indeterminacy between the nature and the convention, Gombrich's theory of representation, to a broad sense, apprehends the limits of Goodman's radical conventionalism and tries to overcome it with a psychologically active processing in association with both sensory equipment and cultural tradition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Goodman and Gombrich represent two similar but distinctive responses to the conventionalist theory of pictorial representation based on commonly acquired knowledge, in opposition to Plato's mimetic theory dependent on resemblance or likeness by the empirical perception on the external world. The contemporary perspectives thus have experienced a shift from defining representation as something appearing between the object and the artwork, to a conventional or cognitive processing between the artwork and the observer. Against the presence of the "innocent eye", the conventionality of the representation here, as I have analysed above, should be understood into two different directions. Goodman's convention is a pre-existing grammatical or linguistic system of symbols, functioning as Saussurean signification in an arbitrary relationship between the represented/signified and the representing work/signifying. In contrast to Goodman's passivity of knowing, Gombrich regards this sort of convention as psychological effects of the work upon the spectators in the course of reception, which can by no means avoid the subjective judgement and interpretation. More importantly, despite the fact that their theories stand for a turning point in the aesthetic discussion of the western aesthetic philosophy in the twentieth century, the limitation of their conventionalist point of view cannot be easily ignored: (1) Goodman's extreme conventionalism in a formalist method with few interests in content, value, historicity, and ideology, which shows a noticeable disparity between his treatment of realism and that of Marxist aesthetics; (2) Gombrich's inconsistent arguments from a conventionalist position then to a revised stance in which he argues for a cognitively active processing as a continuum of both natural perception and socio-cultural convention. In a word, this essay by means of contrast and comparison, has critically investigated values and limits of the conventionalism that will be helpful to the contemporary literary and aesthetic discussion on the concept of representation in a new epoch of intellectual history.

Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Works Cited

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. Leitch et al., pp. 1651-59.
Braembussche, Antoon Van den. "The Imitation Theory." *Thinking Art: An Introduction to Philosophy of Art*. Springer, 2009, pp. 15-35.
Bull, Malcolm. "Scheming Schemata." *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1994, pp. 207-17.
Files, Craig. "Goodman's Rejection of Resemblance." *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1996, pp. 398-412.
Giovannelli, Alessandro. "Goodman's Aesthetics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta et al., 2017, plato.stanford.edu/entries/goodman-aesthetics/. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.
Gombrich, E.H. "Image and Code: Scope and Limits of Conventionalism in Pictorial Representation." *Image and Code*, edited by Wendy Steiner, 1981, The University of Michigan Press, pp. 173-94.
—. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Phaidon, 1987.
Goodman, Nelson. Review of *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, by E.H. Gombrich. *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 57, no. 18, 1960, pp. 595-99.
—. *Language of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Hackett Pub. Co., 1976.
—. Review of "Perspective as a Convention: On the Views of Goodman and Gombrich," by David Carrier. *Leonardo*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1981, pp. 86.
Hyman, John, and Katerina Bantinaki. "Depiction." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta et al., 2017, plato.stanford.edu/entries/depiction/. Accessed 28 Sept. 2020.
Kim, Nanyoung. "Ernst H. Gombrich, Pictorial Representation, and Some Issues in Art Education." *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2004, pp. 32-45.
Leitch, Vincent B., et al., editors. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. 2nd ed., W.W. Norton, 2010.
Lukács, Georg. "Realism in the Balance." *Aesthetics and Politics*, edited by Ronald Taylor, 1980, Verso, pp. 28-59.
Mitchell, W.J.T. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. The University of Chicago Press, 1987.
Moriarty, Sandra E., and Keith Kenny. "A Philosophical Discussion of Representation." *VisualQuest: Journeys toward Visual Literacy*, edited by Robert E. Griffin et al., International Visual Literacy Association, 1997, pp. 235-42.
Plato. *Republic*. Leitch et al., pp. 45-77.
Wollheim, Richard. *The Mind and Its Depths*. Harvard University Press, 1993.